

William Wilberforce, Esq;

At the County Meeting, held at the Castle of York,

On the First of December, 1795.

MR. Wilberforce began his speech by observing, that whatever flattering expectations he might entertain, concerning the feelings and conduct of his Constituents at the present interesting juncture, they had been greatly exceeded. He confessed, he had looked forward to the measure of a County Meeting with some degree of apprehension, on account of the misrepresentations which had been industriously spread, to mislead the public mind with respect to the sense of the people on the bills now depending in Parliament. He had read of meetings having been held, and petitions signed, which never had existence. Yet he had remained not without hopes, that the good sense of the Freeholders of Yorkshire would not be readily imposed upon, or their judgments misled. Under these impressions he had determined to attend the present meeting, (though he was conscious an apology was due for quitting their service in Parliament,) in order that he might hear the opponents of the present measures bring forward their objections, and meet them by fair reason and argument. Though he himself had been traduced, as one who had betrayed the interests of his country, it was not merely on personal considerations that he wished to come down; it was, because the interests of Parliament had been attacked. It was right that accusations such as had gone forth, should undergo the fullest and the maturest discussion.

On this ground it was, that he hoped that day to have met the opponents to the measures of Government face to face, and to have convinced them of the groundlessness of their prejudices, if not determined to shut up all the passages to the understanding, and the avenues to the heart. That opportunity had been denied him: (a) and, considering the probable unanimity of sentiment in the assembly before him, it might seem unnecessary to go fully into the question. One thing, however, he begged leave to observe, and that was, the necessity of passing some bill or other to prevent the confusion and utter ruin into which the nation was in danger of being plunged by the seditious societies which existed in its bosom. These societies, formed on the model of the Jacobin Clubs in France, copying their proceedings, adopting their very phrases, (as though the language of Great Britain was no longer fit to express their sentiments) and endeavouring, to enlighten (as they termed it) the public mind, were labouring, by every means that human ingenuity could devise, to defeat the established order of things so unfavourable to their wishes. Books, prints, copper-plates, expressive of their hatred and contempt of all authority, divine and human, were assiduously distributed; and clubs and debating societies multiplied, where these sentiments were inculcated by inflammatory harangues. In short, it was impossible to conceive the ingenuity in mischief to which these men were prompted by that evil spirit now so busily at work to injure and distress this country. If large bodies of men (he observed) are in the habit of hearing Government continually declaimed against, and described only by its imperfections, (and what mere human institution can be perfect) if they are accustomed to have the common evils of humanity and unavoidable dispensations of Providence ascribed to the misconduct of their rulers; if it is agreeable to the nature of mankind to give way to the impression. The honest and industrious man, whose time and attention are confined to his stated avocations, has not always at hand the means of information, or the aids of argument to repel these efforts.

It was therefore no wonder that a very considerable effect had been produced (he was grieved to say it) by the unwearied exertions of these seditious men upon the minds of numbers, especially in and near the metropolis. All who heard him must know of the insult offered to his Majesty on his late procession to Parliament; of the foul and atrocious attempt which had been made on his Royal Person: Referring then to an expression of the last speaker, (Mr. Stanhope) "that he firmly believed, tho' he could not perhaps adduce legal evidence of the connection between the authors of this attack and the meeting at Copenhagen House," yet he (Mr. Wilberforce) added his own assurance of the fact, and declared that he could pledge himself to prove that connection as distinctly as would be necessary to satisfy even a Court of Justice. These societies it is true, mask their designs under the specious pretence of a parliamentary reform; but he was confident that he was able to prove to the conviction of every honest man, that it was no sort of reform of the present Government which would satisfy these bad men: nothing, in short, but the total overthrow of the Constitution.

It appears that they gave notice to their followers by hand bills of the very hour the King was to go to the

House, and it had been publicly declared at their meeting held a few days before "that they would take care "to give his Majesty a WARM RECEPTION," words pretty intelligible to all! Hence it appears, that at the very time they were talking of order, peace, and a reform in parliament, they had taken measures of a very different nature, and not possible to be misunderstood. Their seditious publications all ran in the same strain; and the very titles of these it would be sufficient to mention. One was entitled "King Killing;" another, "The Downfall of Princes." In these they applauded the conduct of Damiens, Angerstrom and others, who have been the most eminent for assassinating Monarchs; and whose memories have been deservedly consigned to eternal infamy. The men who vend these poisonous compositions, are the very men whom these Societies have selected to publish their proceedings, to receive signatures to their Petitions to Parliament, and to recommend the admission of proper members to their body. Is it not then evident that these Societies were parties to the design, and hoped to benefit by its success? His strength, he said, would fail him, and the patience of his auditors be exhausted, were he to detail a thousandth part of the information he possessed from authentic documents of the unwearied exertions of these bad men, to sap the foundation of our comfort and hope as christians and as members of Society, and to destroy every thing truly valuable both in this life and the next. We were called upon by our love to the Constitution, by our allegiance to the King, by our regard to the interests of Religion, by our desire of present comfort, and our hopes of future happiness, to put an immediate stop to this spreading evil, or it will be too late for ever. But how was this to be effected, when we knew they boasted of having made proselytes in every part of the kingdom, and assured themselves of soon having the whole nation of their sentiments? Surely it was high time to interpose restraints; and he desired any man to point out a plan better adapted to answer the desired purpose, than that marked out by the present bills.

He then proceeded to notice some of the gross misrepresentations which had been made of the provisions of these bills. It has been said, that the bill for preventing seditious meetings deprives us of the power of petitioning Parliament or addressing the Throne. The very reverse of this is the truth. On the contrary, these rights are by the bill recognized and left entire. All meetings called by the High Sheriff, or Lord Lieutenant, or in failure of these by three magistrates, are also authorized; and by the express provisions of that bill, meetings in corporate towns, called by magistrates, are likewise provided for, and means taken to exempt them wholly from its operation. Are meetings called by private individuals suppressed? No. These also may be held, but opportunity is given to the magistrate to know and to notice what passes in them; that those deeds may not be transacted in darkness which cannot bear the light of day. Provision only is made to prevent tumult, disorder and sedition. He would not willingly have interposed any restraint, but it applies only to such dangerous topics as were agitated at Copenhagen House. Political discussion may yet take place. He should not (he added) have approved of any coercion had the matter rested in mere speculative opinions, for these simply considered, are not in danger of producing great political changes; but in this instance we had seen them acted upon, and experienced their pernicious effects.

Some controul therefore became indispensably necessary, and it seemed to him impossible to point out a mode which provided more effectually on the one hand for the security of the constitution, and on the other allowed every reasonable toleration to the subject. Another part of this bill related to the prevention of debating clubs and lectures to which persons were admitted for money. Could the necessity of this be denied when (strange to tell!) there were persons who actually made a trade of sedition, and sought to thrive by it as by a regular calling, and who even repined at the hardship and injustice of the restraining measures now in contemplation as much as if they were in danger of being deprived of an honest employment. But surely when an ample provision is made for other political discussion; when the evils produced by these meetings have been seen and felt, and when it is obvious that such assemblies cannot do any good and may do much harm, it is but fair to say that they ought to be suppressed. He said he had enquired particularly concerning the provisions of the second bill (that for better securing his Majesty's person and government, and preventing treasonable and seditious practices) and was satisfied that nothing was enacted in the first part, but what had always been law, and held as such by the ablest lawyers this country can boast of; amongst whose opinions may be ranked that of Lord Chief Justice Holt, delivered about a century ago, if the antiquity of the authority may not with the reformers of modern times render it in proportion the less esteemed. In the treason or misdemeanor clauses no new offence had been created, and the only punishment added in the latter was that of transportation for a second offence. And if there existed men

who instead of valuing the blessings they enjoyed under the laws and constitution of this land, were found guilty by a jury of their countrymen, of stirring up a general hatred and discontent towards those laws and that constitution, and shewed their incorrigible depravity and hardness of heart, by repeating their crimes, was it hard, was it unreasonable, that such men should be banished into another land?

The provision in the Treason Clause, with respect to one particular offence, might have the appearance of a new law; but he believed it was not really such. Though making war against, and attempting to kill or wound the King, had always been held to be high-treason; yet, making war upon, and attacking either of the other branches of the legislature, was not so clearly defined, as that a subtle and ingenious lawyer might not wrest the law in favour of his client. By the present act this was declared to be a treasonable offence; and was it, then, a matter of complaint, that what was before uncertain, should be made certain; that what was before dubious, should be made clear? He remarked, that in this last provision, the King shews himself less anxious for the preservation of his own person, than that of the constitution of this country; and evinces a desire to extend to every part of the latter the blessings of safety and security. On the whole, he appealed to the judgment of the meeting, how grossly the bills in question had been misrepresented. As few of the opponents to these bills were likely to be present, it became needless to detail and answer all their objections. One only, he would remark upon. We were told by some, that the minds of these disaffected men, would be irritated by the present provisions, and that they ought rather to be quieted by having their demands granted. But what is the extent of these demands? They love not the British Constitution: They are at war, not with one branch of it only, the King; but equally so with each of the other branches, the Lords and Commons; in short, with every thing that is beautiful and excellent in it; with all order, all property, all the best ties of this life, and the ties of another. In short, these bad men set themselves in array against God and man.

These principles were now propagated on system, and it is incredible to any one, who has not been an eye-witness to it, in what a variety of ways, and with what unwearied diligence, this is attempted in the neighbourhood of the Metropolis. How then can we make accommodation, or attempt to conciliate them by mild and lenient measures? He congratulated the meeting on their approbation of the principle of the bills, which the spirit of that day evinced. He admired the British Constitution from his heart; he saw nothing in these bills, by which it was in the least infringed: And he was peculiarly happy to find himself supported in that sentiment by so numerous a body of those whom he had the honour to represent; amongst whom he had been early taught to venerate that constitution, and whom he regarded with the affection of a brother, as well as the esteem of a countryman. He begged leave just to touch upon another subject, which had been the recent ground of misrepresentation and attack;—he meant that of Peace. It was well known, that he was one of those who voted in the last session, that parliament should open the door for negotiation.

A majority of the House of Commons certainly did at that time differ with him, but now he could with satisfaction assure them, that a majority of that house, agreed with him in opinion. Ministers had already stated, that they considered the door as now open for negotiation, and that there was no objection to treat for peace on fair and honourable terms. He added, that while he was now addressing this assembly, they might possibly be occupied in promoting that end. Is it a likely way to obtain such a peace by pressing his Majesty to negotiate for it with haste and precipitancy?

May it not rather excite a doubt of the motives of those who call aloud for peace, that at the very moment when a administration expresses their readiness to treat, and agreeably to their former wishes, they turn about and declare themselves as dissatisfied as ever! Surely this shews not so much a wish for peace, as a desire to displace the present administration. He begged leave before he concluded to inculcate one admonition, which was that those he addressed would be cautious of judging of the conduct of Parliament, by misrepresented statements; or of being influenced by those men who shrink from a discussion which they themselves had called for. He assured the meeting that he should go back to resume his Parliamentary Functions with the truest satisfaction, arising from the consciousness of having discharged his duty, and the happiness of having met with their approbation; and added that he would no longer detain them from expressing their sentiments to His Majesty on the address which had been now proposed.

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(a) The meeting, having been held in the Guildhall of the city, was attended by numbers so much beyond expectation, that a place of greater extent became necessary to contain them, a proposition was therefore made by the Chairman to adjourn the meeting to the Castle Yard. This was peremptorily resisted by the gentlemen who called the meeting, who declared, at the same time, that they would not abide by the sense of the majority. The consequence was, that, leaving the Hall to the few who had given this refusal, the great body of the Freeholders, with the Chairman, adjourned to the Castle Yard.